# Chapter Six

Before finally deciding, I went to see Eli Zeira at military intelligence headquarters in Tel Aviv.

Despite our yawning difference in rank, and in age – Eli was nearly fifteen years older than me – I knew I could be open with him. Not only did we know each other from my role in the sayeret. Eli was a sort of scientist *manqué*. Bright and intellectually curious, he was eager to hear about my studies at Hebrew University, and he began by asking me about the wonders of special relativity, and the space-time continuum. He was so enthralled by the subject, I even began to worry about how, or whether, I could steer the conversation toward the more prosaic matter of my return to the army.

When I did, telling him I was pretty sure I wanted to come back, he smiled broadly. But I said there was one thing I needed to know before deciding. There was one goal that, more than any other, that was drawing me back toward a long-term future in the armed forces: did he think I had a reasonable chance of becoming commander of Sayeret Matkal.

"Look," he said, "it's not my decision. So I can't say for certain. But from your record, and from my own judgement, I'd say it's *more* than a reasonable chance. Nothing in life is certain. But, yes, I'd say it is highly probable." With the exception of Avraham Arnan himself, the commanders of the unit had served roughly two-year terms. That meant Dovik's successor, Uzi Yairi, had roughly 18 months left. "I doubt you'll be next," Eli said, which I wasn't counting on either, if only because I'd still be just turning 27. "You'll probably

have to get some further experience, in another part of the army… And maybe not the next commander after that. But after that, I'd be highly surprised if you weren't chosen."

So I decided. Once I had finished my degree, which would be in another year, in the fall of 1968, I would return to the military. This had an additional, practical benefit. I could ask the army to pay for my final year in Jerusalem, since I knew that I'd be fulfilling, comfortably, the two-year service commitment once I graduated. Still, just as when I'd applied for university, it was not a straightforward process. Because I had formally left the military, I now had to formally re-apply. Minus the boot camp, I had to go through the same process as when I'd entered the army as a teenager. The reason for this, from the army's point of view, was that for an officer to leave and then, after a few years, come back wasn't exactly commonplace. They wanted to make sure I hadn't turned to a life of crime. Or contracted some interminable disease. Or simply gone crazy. Still, there was an ironic upside to having to go through all the testing again. This time, I was passed 100 per cent fit. No one even asked me whether I got sniffles in the winter. And rather than classifying me as APC fodder, they actually proposed to send me to train as a fighter pilot. I did think about doing it, and not only for the undoubted satisfaction of proving the initial evaluators wrong. But, being honest with myself, I figured the odds were that I'd end up as merely a competent pilot. By contrast, I felt confident that I would be a good – I hoped, a *very* good – commander of Sayeret Matkal.

Technically, for my last year in university, I remained a reserve officer. Yet it turned out that these final few terms were the closest thing to a normal student existence I had during my time there. Not just academically. I also had more

time to spend with friends, more time to enjoy getting to know Jerusalem, minus the barbed wire that had run through its midsection for nearly two decades. I even dated, a bit, though always, in the back of my mind, hoping that somehow I'd end up with the girl who had first dazzled me from behind her desk at intelligence headquarters five years earlier. I still went down to Tel Aviv to see Nili Priell from time to time. Yet sadly, with the double demands of my studies and my absences for sayeret operations, months would often go by between our meetings.

During my final year, I was called away by the sayeret just once, and only for a single day. It was near the end of our winter term, in late March 1968. I was part of the unit's fairly minor role in an Israeli attack across the Jordan River that was anything *but* minor. It was our largest military operation since the Six-Day War, and it was directed at a new enemy: a fledgling group of fedayeen who called themselves Fatah, and were led by a guy that I, like most Israelis, had never heard of. Yasir Arafat. He had set up camp with nearly a thousand fighters in a town called Karameh, just across the Jordan. From early in 1968, they had launched several dozen raids, occasionally opening fire but mostly planting mines, not just on the now Israeli-held West Bank but across the border with the Negev. There was considerable disagreement within the Israeli cabinet over whether to launch an attack on his base in Karameh. But the deciding moment came on the eighteenth of March. A school bus in an Israeli town not far from Eilat, in the far south, struck a mine, which killed the driver and a teacher and injured 10 of the children.

We struck at dawn three days later, and threw a huge force into a pincer operation around the camp and the town of Karameh. We sent in something like

ten battalions in all. A full infantry brigade. The paratroopers' top units, including their own sayeret, *Sayeret Tzanhanim*. Also Gorodish's Seventh Armored Brigade. One of the Tzanhanim commandos, Mookie Betzer, would later join Sayeret Matkal, and I remember him describing how they landed by helicopter just north of the Fatah camp and immediately found themselves under AK-47 fire. Several of his comrades were killed within minutes. Mookie was seriously wounded. Gordish's role was to cross the river and advance on Karameh from the south. Soon battling King Hussein's regular army, he also lost several men, and a number of tanks. Amnon Likpkin – another friend, and later a minister in my government – led a unit of French-made armored vehicles called AMLs. They were more maneuverable than tanks. In a face-to-face battle with *real* armor, which is what Amnon soon faced, they were also hopelessly outgunned.

When it was all over, it was hard not to think of that old bit of medical black humor: the operation was successful, but the patient died. Militarily, we achieved our aim. Nearly two hundred Fatah fighters were killed, their camp was put out of operation, and the rest fled eastward. But our forces, especially Mookie's Sayeret Tzanhanim and Amnon's lightly protected AML unit, faced heavy fire, and painful losses. In all, nearly 30 Israeli soldiers were killed, and more than twice that number wounded. Politically, the outcome seemed even murkier. Despite the sinking of the Eilat five months earlier, most Israelis were still basking in our extraordinary victory in the Six-Day War. Now, we had deployed many of the same units that had helped secure that triumph, only to have fought to what looked like a costly draw. As for Arafat and Fatah, they could, and soon did, claim to have stood and fought, and inflicted significant

losses on the vaunted victors of 1967.

I was called up the evening before the battle, to join a small team from the sayeret. Our assignment was to block off the southern entrance to Karameh after Gorodish's advance. Even that proved only a mixed success. We did fulfill our role, just about. But our vehicles got bogged down in mud as we made our way from the east bank of the river towards Karameh. By the time we got there, hundreds of fedayeen had already fled. Arafat, apparently, was among them. We were told later that he got away, in civilian clothes, on a motorcycle.

My most vivid memory was from when we crossed back across the Jordan and began to make our way toward Sirkin. Suddenly, I saw a a guy lying on a stretcher, being tended to by a couple of paramedics. He was badly wounded. One arm had been nearly sliced off by shrapnel, and remained barely attached to his shoulder. But in an unbelievably calm voice, he was instructing the medics, step by step, on how to treat it: where to place the tourniquet. Precisely how tight. Only from the grimace as he spoke could you tell he was in pain. I met him many years later. It turned out that he was a surgeon in civilian life. The arm had been lost. But he was director of a hospital in Kfar Saba, northeast of Tel Aviv.

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I was relieved to get back to university. And while Karameh was the first of my many absences that was not a mystery – the whole country knew what had

happened – I did not feel like talking about it. Even when a couple of my professors, Palmachniks from 1948, nodded hello and made a point of shaking my hand the following day. I did run over in my own mind what had happened. I remember having a sense that the next stage in our conflict would, even more than 1967, require us to be able to answer our enemies not just with the necessary *quantity* of troops and armaments, but with the appropriate *kind* of forces. On the battlefield, I sensed from the Six-Day War, this would mean primarily tanks, properly protected and deployed. Yet even more importantly than before, we'd need to make expanded use of more specialized units. Units like Sayeret Matkal.

Still, I was now mostly focusing on my studies, catching up with all that I'd missed during my first two years, and making sure I finished strongly.

I was also in love again. It was not quite like the first time, my infatuation and courtship with Nili, which I suppose it never is. But over a period of months, my friendship with another young woman whom I'd first met in the army – she, like, Nili did her service on the administrative side of military intelligence – became something much more. Nava Cohen was three years younger than Nili, and five years younger than me. Unlike Nili, whose office was part of military headquarters in Tel Aviv, Nava's was in the eastern suburb of Givatayim, alongside the technological unit. By the time that she, and the few dozen other young women in her unit, had left the Israeli Army, they probably knew more about the people who served in it than anyone on earth. Their job was to open and read soldiers' letters, to check for inadvertent leaks of sensitive information.

When I first met her, I was already at Hebrew University. But in addition to my call-ups for operational missions, I would sometimes go back to Kav Chamesh for social occasions. It was Nechemia Cohen who introduced me to Nava. Though the two of them never went out, he used to look forward to seeing her, and flirting with her, when he had meetings with the technological unit. I think it must have been a little more than a year before the Six-Day War when he invited me to a mixture of fancy-dress party and satirical revue to mark the Jewish holiday of Purim. Nava had a boyfriend at the time: an electronics whiz in the tech unit who was handsome, charming, outgoing and, as I discovered at the Purim party, a natural comedian. I saw her a few more times in the months that followed, either with Nechemia or other friends from the sayeret. But it was only once she, too, arrived at Hebrew University, in the autumn of 1967, that we began to spend time together.

At first, it was because of Nechemia. Just three months after his death, we were still trying to come to terms with the fact that he was gone. And with Avraham Arnan leading the effort, all of us who had served with him were determined to establish some kind of truly *living* memorial. We decided to build a *Moadon Sayarim*, a centre for scouting and navigation for young people from all over Jerusalem. Avraham interceded with the mayor, Teddy Kollek, to find us a site with nearly an acre of land, and we started working, a bit as we had on the Kav Chamesh clubhouse but with legally purchased materials this time, to get the facility up and running. Nava was one of the former sayeret colleagues and other friends of Nechemia who pitched in with the work, which took a good six months to complete. Once the center was open, I became one of the youth guides and instructors. Often, when I'd take a group on a long scouting walk

into the West Bank and then back to Jerusalem, I'd ask Nava to come along as well.

But when I first asked her out, we were in the public library next to the Hebrew University campus in Ramat Gan. It had a section where you could listen to tapes through headphones. I'd often go there to listen to classical music performances. Nava was studying English literature, and I'd sometimes find her there as well: listening to English recordings of Shakespeare with the text of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* propped on the table in front of her. Since I wasn't shackled by having to follow along with all the *alacks* and *alasses* and *forsooths* as she was, I could read the newspaper as I allowed the orchestral flourishes to wash over me. I think it was on an afternoon in the spring of 1968 that I turned to the movie-listings section, circled three or four films that looked interesting, drew a big question mark in the margin and passed it to her. She looked puzzled, but only for a second or two. Then she smiled, and put a checkmark next to one of the movies. That evening was our first date.

We began to spend more and more time together. We went to the movies. On walks through the city. On navigational treks with my charges at the youth club. And occasionally on what I guess is a young sayeret officer's equivalent of a romantic getaway: by Jeep, on a moonlit night, through the Negev. At least for the first few months, I did sometimes find myself comparing her to Nili. But there was a slightly bittersweet moment shortly after Karameh – healthy, no doubt, for my budding relationship with Nava – when I ran into Sami Nachmias, one of the Unit 101 veterans whom Avraham Arnan had sent to meet me when he was first deciding whether to recruit me. Sami and I had remained in touch, and become friends. He, too, had briefly taken a romantic interest in

Nili. “Did you hear she’s getting married?” he asked me. I said, as evenly as I could manage, that no, I hadn’t heard. I hadn’t been in touch with her now for six or seven months. “It’s a guy, an officer, from the parachutists,” Sami said, and then, smiling, added: “Someone more her own age.”

Both Nili and Nava were city girls. In Nava’s case, however, the city was not Tel Aviv, which struck me as one reason, perhaps, that her demeanor, even her undoubted intelligence, and her beauty, were more understated. Her home was Tiberias, in the north, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Over a period of hundreds of years before the founding of the state, it was known, within Judaism, as one of the four “holy cities”. Jerusalem was the main one, of course, along with Hebron, the burial place of the Hebrew patriarchs. The fourth – the hill town of Safed, 25 miles from Tiberias and, at nearly 3,000 feet, overlooking the whole of the Galilee – is where Nava’s maternal grandparents came from. It had been the scene of heavy fighting in the spring of 1948. First, the Arabs, a clear majority in the town, attacked the Jewish quarter and tried to drive the Jewish residents out. But with a Palmach unit leading the counter-attack, the Arab forces were defeated, and the entire Arab population fled – including the parents of Arafat’s eventual successor, Mahmoud Abbas, or Abu Mazen. Nava’s family and Abu Mazen’s were in the same business. They were merchants, shuttling between Safed and Damascus, where they purchased cloth and other goods to sell in the Galilee.

Nava’s parents were both from old, established Sephardi families. Her father had fought in the British army in the Second World War, and now ran the offices of Bank Leumi in Tiberias. Her mother ran a shop in the city’s best hotel. And in contrast to Nili’s mother and father, Nava’s parents liked me. As lifelong

Mapainiks, they saw me as an eminently worthy partner for their daughter. Her mother, in particular, had not been a great fan of the guy from the technology unit whom Nava had been dating when I first met her. At first, I thought that was because he was a bit too *Tel Avivi*, a bit too flash. It turned out that it was because his father worked as a tourist guide. If you ran a gift shop for tourists, like Nava's mother, tour guides were the lowest form of life, one notch above an ameba, since they lived off commissions and took visitors only to stores that were paying them on the side.

We were married in the spring of 1969, in the Tiberias hotel where Nava's mother had her shop. It was a wonderful day. Happy. That goes without saying. Also, a proud day. My parents and brothers came up from Mishmar Hasharon, along with two busloads of my friends and theirs from the kibbutz. Avraham Arnan was there, too, of course. But Aharon Yariv and Eli Zeira, my ultimate commanders when I'd been in Sayeret Matkal and two of the military intelligence heroes of the Six-Day War, also drove up from Tel Aviv. Years later, as I rose to more senior posts in the military, I would sometimes be invited by soldiers under my command to their weddings. The first time I was asked, my instinct was to say no. It would be a whole day's commitment, no doubt consisting mostly of shaking the hands of people I'd never see again. But when I recalled how much Ahrale's and Eli's gesture had meant to me at my wedding, I said yes. Whenever asked, whenever physically possible, I made a point of never turning down these invitations.

By the time of my wedding, I was back in Sayeret Matkal, but only just. The Israeli army, like any large organization, is not without its bureaucracy. Or its politics. The initial delay in my return to the unit, after I'd finished at university

in the summer of 1968, was down to the bureaucrats. But the real hold-up was due to politics. Or, perhaps more charitably, and more fairly, simple human nature. When I had left, I was deputy commander to Dovik Tamari. The most logical arrangement now was clearly for me to come back as number-two to Tamari's successor, Uzi Yairi. But Uzi had misgivings. When he'd come into the unit, it was to replace me as Dovik's deputy because I was leaving. Though he arrived with a highly distinguished record in the parachutists' sayeret, he was new to Sayeret Matkal: who we were, what we did, how we operated. In the six or seven weeks during which we overlapped, I'd helped acclimatize him, and did everything I could to integrate him into the force. I think that from his point of view, the fact that I'd essentially been his mentor a few years earlier now risked blurring the lines of authority if I were to return as deputy. Besides, he had his own choice as number-two: an undeniably able fellow parachutist named Yossi Caplan.

This would have been frustrating enough under ordinary circumstances. But in June 1968, as I was about to leave university, the simmering tension along the Suez Canal escalated, with Egyptian artillery fire on our front-line units, the first step toward what would become known as the full-scale War of Attrition. In July, our "new" enemy – Arafat's Fatah and a growing array of other armed Palestinian factions – began what would become a spate of hijackings and other terror attacks. Three members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine commandeered an El Al flight from London, knocked out the co-pilot and forced the pilot to fly the plane to Algeria. I felt an impatience, a powerlessness, from not being back in the Sayeret Matkal as I'd hoped. I felt something else as well, which would stay with me and strengthen once I did

return to the unit: a belief that with these new kinds of threats, we would have to reshape the sayeret, and make it more than simply an intelligence unit, as part of Israel's response. I was convinced that, like Britain's SAS, the sayeret would also have to equip itself to fight.

I did, in fact, get summoned almost as soon as the news broke about the El Al hijacking. Yet the call did not come from Uzi. It was Avraham, still an influential officer at military intelligence headquarters, where he had become the head of the technological unit. He wanted my view, within hours if possible, about whether Sayeret Matkal, or any Israeli unit, could mount an operation against the hijackers in Algiers. It took me barely an hour to come back with an answer: no. Even if we'd had experience in this kind of mission, we simply knew too little about the operations, and even the geography, of the Algiers airport. We had no useful resources on the ground. We'd essentially be operating blind, making it up as we went along. It was a recipe for failure, maybe even disaster.

I am sure that others, at all levels, were being asked the same question I was, and that they came up with the same discouraging conclusion. The day after the plane landed, the Algerian authorities got the hijackers to release all *non*-Israelis. Most of the Israeli passengers were freed a few days later. It took nearly another month for the crisis to be resolved, however, in back-channel talks with the Algerian government. Despite political pressures not to negotiate, much less contemplate concessions to the terrorists, Prime Minister Eshkol ultimately chose to save the lives of the remaining passengers and crew by agreeing to release 16 Arab prisoners serving long sentences in Israel for attacks in which civilians had been killed or wounded.

Even before then, Avraham had brought me into headquarters as part of a team he set up to guard against future attacks on El Al aircraft. We were five in all. I was, in effect, the voice of Sayeret Matkal. The others included an officer from the Shin Bet, Israel's equivalent of the FBI, and three engineering specialists, one from El Al and the others from Avraham's technological unit. The main imperative took us barely an hour to agree on, in our very first meeting. The Algiers hijackers, traveling under false passports, had been able simply to walk into the cockpit. Whatever we came up with would have to make that impossible from now on. The other early decision we reached was on the need for some kind of specially trained military presence aboard all El Al airliners. That step was implemented within weeks. Some of the first of these "air marshals" were reservists from the sayeret.

Coming up with a way to safeguard the cockpit took a bit longer. But after many hours working on an identical Boeing 707 in a remote hangar at Lod Airport, we designed what we called a "submarine door" system. In fact, it involved adding a second door, as well as strengthening the main cockpit entrance so that it could withstand light-arms fire. The outer door operated as a security cordon: it couldn't be opened without the pilot pressing a button in the cockpit. Once he did open it, it would automatically close behind whoever had entered, creating the submarine-like area between the two doors. These refittings cost, as I recall, only about $12,000 per plane. By the end of the year, they'd been installed on the whole El Al fleet. Hijackings continued in the Middle East and beyond. I, myself, would play a key role in our military response to the commandeering of an Air France jet to Entebbe, Uganda, eight years later. But never again was an El Al airliner hijacked. In retrospect, the

countermeasures we implemented seem almost blindingly obvious. But one of my deep, abiding regrets – especially after the terrible tragedy of 9/11 in the United States – is that other international airlines did not take similar steps at the time.

By the early autumn of 1968, I did finally know that I'd be going back to Sayeret Matkal. It would be early the next year, at the end of Uzi's term. I would be deputy to his successor. I was especially looking forward to rejoining because the new commander was an early mentor of mine, and a friend. It would be Menachem Digli, with his broken leg now fully recovered from the motorcycle accident. There was some talk about my returning earlier, as a kind of co-deputy to Uzi along with Yossi Caplan. We actually tried that very briefly, but it became clear that it didn't make sense, for anyone.

So I arranged, in the interim, to do what Eli Zeira had recommended when I'd first talked to him about the eventual prospect of becoming Sayeret Matkal commander: to get "some further experience" elsewhere in the army. The choice, after what I'd experienced in the Six-Day War, was straightforward. I decided to make a start, at least, in training as an officer in the armored corps. The first rung involved joining a two-month course for tank company commanders, typically in charge of a dozen tanks. It was held at a training base in the far south of the country. With Eli's and Avraham's support, I got permission to join. It also helped that I already knew one of the commanders of the training unit: Chaim Erez. I'd met him during the first days of the 1967 war. One of the operational commanders of Gorodish's Seventh Brigade had been killed, and Chaim was promoted in his place.

Still, as I began the training, there was a practical hurdle that not even he, or a sympathetic word from headquarters, could spirit away. I'd never actually driven a tank, and had no idea how. So although the command aspects of running a tank company were taught to all of the students, I had no choice but to be part of the APC group – where I did, of course, have background from my *tironut* in Beersheva. I found the course fascinating. I worked incredibly hard during my eight weeks there. At the end, I was one of two students – the other, who had spent all his army service in a tank unit – singled out for special commendation.

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When I got back to Kav Chamesh, in February 1969, it was almost as if victory of 1967 had never happened. Across the Jordan River, Fatah and the other armed Palestinian groups were getting more and more assertive. King Hussein seemed increasingly unable, or unwilling, to rein them in. Twice, in early December, Israel had struck by air: first, a helicopter-borne raid by the paratroopers against a series of bridges near Amman, and then a series of bombing sorties against Palestinian military camps. On the Egyptian front, despite an ambitious commando attack by the parachutists in October that took out an electric transformer and two key bridges nearly 300 miles south of Cairo, there were increasing signs that Nasser was intent on ratcheting up hostilities further.

The sayeret's role, at this point, was still limited to intelligence operations.

But they were on a scale, and of a difficulty, hugely greater than before I'd left. The 14 months that followed my return proved by far the most challenging of any I'd spent in uniform. There was never any question that Digli was in overall command. But we had an extraordinary close relationship, with absolute trust on both sides, and he gave me enormous latitude, in effect leaving the operational side almost completely to me.

One effect of our victory in the Six-Day War was, at least for now, intact: the outward shift in our borders. But in pure military intelligence terms, that actually posed problems. All of the advantage we'd achieved by being able to listen in to Jordanian, Syrian and Egyptian military communications was gone. The intercept devices which we'd installed during my first stint with the sayeret were on territory that were now under Israeli control.

So whereas before we had focused our operations on the Golan Heights, the West Bank and the Sinai, we had to penetrate deeper. The aim in the north was to go over, or around, Mount Hermon and tap into communications traffic between the Syrians' new front line and Damascus. On our eastern flank, we made an equivalent shift, though not just in order to penetrate Jordanian military communications. We planned overnight missions far into the interior of Jordan, in the hope of being able to get advance warning if, in a future war, Iraqi forces started moving toward Israel as in 1948. And in the south, we concentrated on the major communications cables running between the canal and the Egyptian capital, Cairo.

The word "canal" will conjure up images of the tranquil little waterways that you can see in some European and American cities. But crossing the Suez

Canal, now in effect our border with Egypt, presented a range of problems unlike anything I'd had to cope with, even during our T-junction missions into the Sinai. Merely crossing the canal would be a formbidable task. It was about 325 yards wide, more than three American football fields, and nearly 50 feet deep. When I began looking at ways of not just crossing, but carrying out an operation without being seen and having to fight our way out, it seemed all but impossible. Not only were there Egyptian troop positions, and patrols, on the opposite bank. Before you even reached them, there was a man-made slope, covered in many places with paving stones, and protected on the top by land mines. There were also agricultural settlements on the Egyptian side of the canal to worry about, not to mention cities like Suez and Ismailia.

We did, eventually, figure out a way to cross. Working with *Shayetet 13*, the seaborne commando unit that was Israel's equivalent of the US Navy SEALs, we spent days trying to simulate the conditions of a canal-crossing. We ran into a series of frustrating difficulties in doing so. It was hard to find a body of water inside Israel that would provide not just the proper width, but which would also replicate the strong current, of the Suez Canal. We did make progress. We figured out a strategy for either avoiding or neutralizing the Egyptians' anti-personnel mines. And we eventually designed a cable system, a more sophisticated version of the one I'd tried and failed with on the Golan five years earlier, to allow soldiers to guide themselves across individually or in small rubber boats.

It took months, however, before we felt confident enough even to attempt a direct crossing. And as the fighting with the Egyptians escalated, with Israeli casualties mounting, we looked for other ways to restore at least some

capability to penetrate their communications network. The short-term solution we found turned out to present challenges of its own. Working with the SEALs, we organized a series of operations to tap into phone wires a good 25 miles south of the canal, crossing the upper reaches of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Suez. The crossing itself took a couple of months to get right. There was no GPS then, and an oddity of the old British Mandate maps we were using was that their measurements of the opposite shore were something like a mile off. We ended up having to make our own map, from reconnaissance photos. We also re-purposed radar devices from one of our anti-aircraft batteries and used them as a directional guide when we finally made the crossing in rubber dinghies. Knowing that we couldn't – or at least didn't want to – do this kind of thing repeatedly, we decided against merely taking a bugging unit to place on a telephone pole. This time, based on further reconnaissance photos, we ferried across a replica of an entire pole, complete with intercept equipment. It didn't come close to giving us the coverage we had had before the Six-Day War. The units south of the canal were peripheral. They were likely to get real-time information only in the event of another full-scale war. It was merely a start.

The real target remained to intercept communications along the canal, or, even better, on the main cable between the city of Suez and central headquarters in Cairo. I soon realized that the only realistic way to organize an operation of that scale was with a helicopter-borne raid miles behind the Egyptians' front line. In theory, we had the tools to succeed: improved Sikorsky choppers, as well as newly delivered, French-made Super Frelons that could carry even larger loads. But there were multiple obstacles to planning a mission that might actually work, starting with the seeming impossibility of helicoptering across

Egyptian lines without being seen. In some ways, being Sayeret Matkal – the sayeret of the General Staff – gave us clout. It certainly gave us extraordinary access. But it also meant that our operations had ultimately to be signed off by one or more of the top commanders of the armed forces. That fact alone – the fact that the buck would stop on their desks – made them instinctively cautious. The idea of taking a small fleet of helicopters across the canal, or even the Red Sea, on an intelligence operation seemed to them so risky as to be almost insane. And as if that weren't discouraging enough, the commanders of the air force were equally reluctant to consider it.

I ended up working with the people I knew we'd need most in the event we ever got the go-ahead: the helicopter units. Initially, with their best and most unflappable senior officers, like Nechemia's Cohen's older brother, Cheetah. Then, increasingly, with the chopper pilots themselves. They, too, were highly skeptical at first. But I had personal experience of operating in the Sinai. I also had a physics degree. Along with the technological unit, I began developing the idea of crossing the Red Sea by helicopter and using a combination of the the choppers' ability to maneuver and fly low, and the deep *wadis* along some areas of the coastline, to avoid detection by Egyptian radar. The plan involved calculating the range and detection characteristics of the radar, and mapping out a precise flight path to elude discovery. In the end, it took a formal presentation on the behavior of waves, a sheaf of maps showing the precise flight routes, and a series of live tests in the Negev to convince them.

Still, even if that part worked, there was the obvious danger of being seen, or at least heard, as we made our way across. To clear that objection, I proposed a complex series of diversionary actions. We suggested three helicopters instead

of just one. Two of them, flying higher with the express aim of *being seen*, would land decoy teams in remote areas dozens of miles away from the cable. They'd fire mortars at whatever seemed a remotely likely target and, after an hour or so, board the choppers and return. The real unit, meanwhile, flying low among the *wadis*, would head for the communications cable.

Still, however, the answer was no. I can remember the response of the chief-of-staff himself, Chaim Bar-Lev, when we proposed it. "It's a plan," he said, "that is built on chicken legs!"

So I parked the idea, although still confident, or at least hopeful, that sooner or later, we'd get the OK. I focused on finding other ways, beyond our fake telephone poll, which was well away from front-line positions, to restore a meaningful capacity to listen in on the Egyptians. One of the communications cables used by their front-line units ran parallel to the canal, about 40 feet back from the water. But even to get to it would require crossing the canal, and then over the raised mound, with its anti-personnel mines, on the opposite bank.

We decided on a tunnel instead. There were, in fact, two separate tunnel plans. The "big tunnel" would involve digging underneath the whole width of the canal. Avraham was an especially enthusiastic supporter of what seemed, even to me, unworkable. He sent a small team from the tech unit on a series of visits to world-leading construction and engineering firms to gauge its feasibility. These fact-finding missions were so far flung that if frequent-flyer miles had existed back then, our technology experts would never have had to pay for an air ticket again. But the verdict they brought back was, at best, mixed. The "big tunnel" would take a lot of time to build, especially given the

need to hide what we were doing from the Egyptians. There also remained serious doubts whether, if and when the structure reached the far bank, we'd be able to dig the final segment, from there to the communications cable, without being discovered.

My focus was on the alternative "small tunnel" project. It, too, faced the problem of getting from the canal bank to the underground cable without being found out. The difference was that we would be *starting* the tunnel on the Egyptian side of the canal. We would begin by boring into the man-made dike – removing the protective paving stones and replacing them after each night's work. From there, we would dig the further 10 to 15 yards toward the cable. Before we started, I, too, went on a foreign fact-finding mission. But mine was not to France or Britain or the US. Along with a structural engineer doing his reserve duty in the technological unit, I visited Iran – a trip set up with the help of the Mossad, which had good relations with the Shah's government. We spent two weeks in the hills west of Tehran, with a local tribe which, for thousands of years, had been digging horizontal, underground wells that sometimes stretched, sloping gently downward, for as long as 10 or 20 miles. Their task was made slightly easier because nearly all of them seemed barely over five feet tall. But if I had any doubt about the potential pitfalls, their attire reinforced the point: the well-diggers worked in white clothing, so that, in the event the underground chamber fell in, it could double as an Islamic burial shawl.

Their craft was fascinating. Every several hundred yards, they would carve a narrow, vertical shaft, which would provide them an entry point as the tunnel progressed, as well as letting in fresh air. They placed candles all along the way to allow them to check, as they got further and further, that they were digging in

a straight line. They ensured the gentle slope with hand-crafted levels. The most relevant skill for our tunnel was the digging itself, which they did with rudimentary tools and, where possible, their hands. When I got back to Israel, I briefed the 12-man squad I'd selected for the operation on what we'd seen in Iran. We also did more than a dozen of test digs on a mock-up of the Egyptian bank of the canal, not only to get a sense of how difficult the task would be, but of how much noise it would make.

By the autumn of 1969, we were ready. I ran the operation from the command post. But in this case, the command post was just a few hundred feet back, on our side of the canal. We chose a portion of the stone-faced rise on the other side that was roughly between two Egyptian positions, about 300 yards on either side. At first, we worked only at night. A small team from *Shayetet 13* went first. They swam across, testing the strength and direction of the current. Then they secured a wooden stake in the first bit of solid ground on the other side, attached strong nylon rope to it and swam back to secure it to a stake on our side. The tunnel-diggers crossed in rubber dinghies hooked to the rope. Progress was slow at the beginning. But after five days, they got deep enough underground – and self-confident enough – to suggest that we work by daytime as well. An hour or so before dawn, when most of the team would come back across the canal, a rotating day shift would remain. Since we could see across, the agreement was that we would warn them whenever there were signs an Egyptian patrol was approaching, at which point they would down their tools and wait until the risk had passed. It took two weeks in all. But it succeeded. We had our first intercept of Egyptian cable traffic along the canal, and we'd done it without ever having to break ground on the other side.

But the War of Attrition, far from abating, was intensifying. Despite heavy casualties on the Egyptian side, President Nasser was showing no sign of wanting to wind down the fighting. And we were taking serious casualties: several hundred already dead, many hundreds more wounded. Even the air force had lost  planes, and pilots. On a single day, at the beginning of December, with the help of upgraded radar from the Soviet Union, Egyptian MiG pilots downed two Israeli Mirages and, a few hours later, one of our US-made Phantom II fighter jets.

It was obvious, at least to us in the sayeret, that the escalation in the fighting made the argument for trying to tap into their main communications cable all the stronger. But what finally got us the green light for the operation was not our powers of persuasion. It was a further, dramatic shift in the conflict. In January 1970, our air force began a campaign of "deep-penetration" bombing, hitting targets dozens of miles back from the canal, including a number of sites not far from Cairo itself. Before the month was out, they'd bombed an Egyptian commando camp, several barracks, an enginnering workshop and an ammunition factory. For both Bar-Lev and the government – now under Golda Meir, following Levi Ehskol's death, from a heart attack, nearly a year before – the strategic aim was to raise the stakes, in the hope that Nasser would finally press for an end to the fighting. Yet from our standpoint, the new bombing missions provided perfect cover for the operation I'd proposed. We could make the diversionary mortar sorties look to the Egyptians like just another deep-penetration attack.

In the months since Bar-Lev had turned down the plan, I had also added another layer of diversion. The plan now for the main unit – the cable unit – to

hit an electricity line, and an oil pipeline as well, as cover for our real target: the main communications link the front-line forces and Egyptian central command in Cairo.

We got the formal go-ahead only days after the start of the deep-penetration air campaign. Thanks to our stubborn refusal to take "no" for a final answer, and our regular simulation exercises in the Negev, we were ready. Two days later, a couple of hours after sunset, we set off in a trio of heavily loaded transport helicopters across the Gulf of Suez, nearly skimming the water as we crossed, and peeling off into separate teams on the opposite shore. The other two groups headed toward infrastructure targets 120 miles to the south, with a brief to cause as much commotion as possible without engaging Egyptian troops, much less civilians, along the way.

I led the main team, ten in all, and we peeled north, flying low through an increasingly steep series of barren hills, before setting down a few miles behind the main road from Suez City to Cairo. As soon as our chopper had touched down, we disgorged two Soviet-made Egyptian Jeeps, captured in 1967, complete with military license plates. We'd already loaded them with the equipment we'd need, so within barely an hour we had placed explosive charges – with a 10-hour time delay – on the electricity cable and oil pipeline from the canal to the Egyptian capital.

Then, came the real operation. And the real problems. Even though we weren't operating in the desert, we still had to guard against giving away our destination to anyone who might happen to see our Jeeps, or try to track them afterward. So we began by driving 10 miles in the direction of Cairo, before

cutting off onto a series of side-roads and making our way back to the site of the cable. But either we'd misread our reconnaissance photos, or the cable hadn't been laid straight. Perhaps both. After two hours of digging, we still hadn't found it. Our rudimentary metal-detecting equipment initially failed to locate it as well – until, just as I was about to summon the helicopter back from Israel and cut our losses – it finally chirped out a faint signal. It took another five minutes, but we did, in the end, find it.

Still, my instinct was to leave. We'd hit the electricity cable and the pipline, which would be unlikely to cause lasting damage, but was at least some achievement. The part of the operation that had been causing the most concern – actually getting in, undetected – had gone off without a hitch. So far. But unless we worked far more quickly than planned, by the time we installed the intercept on the communications line it was likely to be getting light. Rather than risk blowing the entire mission, I figured we'd be better off pulling out, and trying again in a month or two.

This kind of caution, to put it mildly, was out of character. My reputation in the sayeret, from my very first mission on the Golan, was as an officer who would sooner break off communications with my command base than break off a mission. Now, I could hear the surprise in Menachem Digli's voice when I radioed him with my recommendation that we abort, return to Israel, reboot, and try again. "If that's your judgement," he said from the command post in the Sinai. It was in the large intelligence and observation base we'd built after 1967 on Jebel Um-Hashiba, which, at nearly 2,400 feet, was by far our highest vantage point near the canal. Not only was Digli there, along with several other sayeret officers. Bar-Lev was as well, and Eli Zeira.

I was about to reply – reaffirming that yes, with reluctance, I felt withdrawal seemed the wisest course – when I heard Digli in spirited discussion with someone whose voice I recognized. Avshalom Horan, known as Avhsa, was the youngest officer in the sayeret, in fact the only one younger than I was. He was also both smart, and level-headed. "Avsha says he thinks you can still do it," Digli said. For a few moments, I thought it over. My sense, not just from Avsha but from Menachem too, was not so much that they were confident we had time to complete the operation. That, they couldn't possibly judge from Um Hashiba. But both of them knew how tough it had been for us to get approval, and how long and hard we'd had to argue before getting the green light. Their reluctance to abort, I figured, was mainly because they feared we'd never get a second chance.

"We'll do it," I told him, and signed off. We worked flat out, every one of us pitching in: digging out an area big enough for the T-junction unit with its transmitter and antenna, then connecting and reburying it, and cleaning up our traces as best we could. Even on a January night, our Egyptian army uniforms were soaked with sweat by the time we'd finished. We still had to repeat our elaborate driving maneuver, looping around and crossing back over the Suez-Cairo road miles from the cable site. Dawn was now, maybe, 10 minutes away, so I felt I had no option but to radio the helicopter pilot with a change in our pick-up point – still well off from the road, but a lot closer than I'd planned. Still, we made the pickup, got the Jeeps back inside, and took off. We had barely reached the first *wadis* on the way back to Israel, when we heard a series of loud explosions. We were still only six or seven miles away, so we could see huge flames leaping up from the damaged pipeline.

It had been a close call, too close. But the mission had worked. It was, by far, the most ambitious intercept operation we'd done, not just since 1967, but since our first missions on the Golan and in Sinai. And with the War of Attrition showing every sign of getting even fiercer, we had, for the first time since the Six-Day War, a direct, real-time link at the highest level of Egypt's military communications. When we landed back in Israel, Menachem himself was there to greet us. He smiled broadly. He hugged each of us. Then, he handed me a small cloth insignia. I'd earned it, he said, and it came with Bar-Lev's endorsement: a promotion, from captain to major.

* * *

The endorsement that mattered even more was that it was now clear – if not yet definite, or official – that I was going to become commander of the sayeret at the end of Menachem's term, a little bit more than a year away, in the spring of 1971. With his agreement, and Eli Zeira's, I decided to use that time to finish what I'd begun a couple of years earlier: to learn all I could about tank warfare, in the expectation that my eventual place in the army, after leaving Sayeret Matkal, would be in the armored corps.

The few weeks it took to find the appropriate training course came with the bonus of being able to spend more time than I usually managed at home with Nava – especially gratifying, since she was two months pregnant with our first child. We had bought an apartment in a cluster of low-rises in Ramat Aviv, in the north of Tel Aviv, not far from the university. I'd paid for a third of it, from

my modest savings. Nava's parents had generously pitched in a further one-third, and we'd taken out a mortgage to pay the rest. The apartment was small, about 700 square feet, but big enough, we figured, for us and the baby. More importantly, it was close enough to where I'd be on the initial tank training for me to get back at least on some weekends.

It was essentially a conversion course, for young officers without any background in armor, It was exactly what I had hoped for. There were eight of us in all. Ironically, since the rest of them were from the infantry, my earlier company commanders' course actually gave me a slight head start. But in any case, we started from scratch. First, we completed the armored version of basic training. Then, an intensive period of practical instruction in every aspect of operating a battlefield tank: driving it, loading the shells, calibrating, shooting, communications. Even maintenance. Every individual role in a tank team. The next stage, which lasted well over a month, was to learn how to be commander on a single tank. Then, platoon commander, for a group of three tanks. Next, the bit I'd done already, but only on an APC, we trained as company commanders, to lead a group of twelve tanks.

Finally, in the summer of 1970, we were placed in command of an actual company – with the very real possibility that, with the War of Attrition ratcheting up even further, we might soon be leading our unit into battle. If our escalated air attacks were intended to get Nasser to stand down, they turned out to have had the opposite effect. At the end of January, he'd gone to Moscow, and returned not just with the promise of a full Soviet air-defense division, along with the newest versions of their SAM-2 and SAM-3 anti-aircraft systems. It took them a couple of months to get fully deployed, and for a while

it looked like our air force's deep-penetration strikes were having a real effect. The major turn-around came when the Soviets moved forward many of their SAMs from around the major cities, Cairo and Alexandria, towards the Suez Canal. There were soon something like 15 SAM batteries, mostly SAM-2s but also several of the more advanced SAM-3s, in clusters positioned just 15 to 30 miles from the canal. By July, the Americans were getting concerned enough that they supplied our jets with sophisticated electronic jamming units which, in theory at least, would neutralize the Soviet missile fire. They didn't. On the first mission where our planes used them, two of our new F-4 Phantoms were hit by SAM-3s. One managed to limp back to base. The other was shot down.

I got my company in July. It was part of a brigade led by none other than Dovik Tamari, the sayeret commander, and friend, with whom I'd worked during my first stint as deputy. Dovik had come to the sayeret from the parachutists. But like me, he had seen, from the 1967 war, the growing role of tanks and had moved to the armored corps. As the War of Attrition dragged on, and especially as it had escalated, each Israeli tank brigade would spend three months on the front line, along the canal, and three months in a training, maneuver, and reserve role. When I arrived, we were still a couple of months from duty on the canal.

I focused on getting my company ready. For all that I'd learned in the armored course, I had been puzzled, and frustrated, by the rigidity of the "standard operating procedures" that we were taught, and were constantly urged to impress on the soldiers under our command. I understood the need for these rules, *tirgolot* in Hebrew. But the mindset seemed bizarre: they were treated not as guidelines but almost as religious commandments, with the unspoken

assumption that as long as you followed them in battle, everything would turn out just fine. Though I hadn't yet commanded tanks in battle, I had seen them, in one case at uncomfortably close range, in the Six-Day War. And I couldn't think of a single one of the *tirgolot* that would have improved our chances of success, much less saved lives.

Even outside of battlefield conditions, some of them verged on the absurd. There was one operational procedure, for instance, for dealing with a wounded crew member. Then, a quite separate one if there was a fire in the tank turret. This, despite the fact that if your turret was on fire, you'd almost certainly have a wounded crew member.

There was another procedure called "feet out of the tank" – essentially when your tank had been damaged, you were under enemy fire, and you had to get out and fire back. In the exercises used to test it, however, the criterion for success was how quickly two individual crew members could leave the tank, position its machine gun on the ground, and get ready to take orders from their tank commander on where to fire. There were no actual targets, no firing. In fact, the commander himself was not even firing. Just shouting orders. It struck me almost as a parody of the real tank battle I'd seen in the Sinai.

But my main frustration was that every one of the *tirgolot* was for an individual tank. There were no rules for a tank *platoon*. For example, what if one tank was hit, with two of its four crew members wounded, and the others were unable to operate it? In a real battle, the urgent need would be to get the tank out of further danger – by providing fire cover for a second tank to maneuver behind it, attach a cable, and drag it to safety. There was no standard

operating procedure for that.

In drilling my unit, I confess I glossed over the *tirgolot*. I assumed my crews knew them already. I emphasized, instead, our need to form a mobile, agile team that would be prepared to respond to a series of challenges or threats – or opportunities – that might really occur when we found ourselves in battle. I especially emphasized the need to master accurate, long-range gunnery. I also made a point of training not just on open ground, but to be able to move around, or even over, steep dunes and through *wadis*. In the event, we never had to test these skills against the Egyptians. That would come only several years later, in a real war, when I found myself leading tanks in a real battle. Yet when it came time for our entire division to hold a battle exercise – with not just Bren, but the then-head of the Southern Command, Arik Sharon, in attendance – our company was chosen to take the lead in demonstrating mobility and long-range firing capability.

Beyond the confidence that gave me, I learned an enormous amount about our evolving tank forces, and the new threats they faced, during the half-year that I spent in the Sinai. It helped that Dovik knew me, and had worked with me, in the sayeret. I dare say I was included in more of the brigade's discussions of tactics and strategy, and our day-to-day evaluation of what was happening along the canal, than some other company commanders. But part of that was also due to the fact that, from my more recent sayeret attempts to find a way to cross the canal, I had a first-hand knowledge of how the Egyptians were deployed, and operated, on the other side.

A debate was churning within the military leadership over "lessons" we

should perhaps be learning from the War of Attrition – and more specifically, the line of fixed fortifications that we'd built on our side of the canal. They would become known as the Bar-Lev Line, because Chaim Bar-Lev, as chief of staff, ultimately had to sign off on the idea. In fact, the main impetus had come from Dovik's, and now my, ultimate commander, Avraham Adan. A former Palmachnik, known as Bren, he had distinguished himself on the battlefield in 1948, in 1956, and again in the Six-Day War. He was now the overall commander of the armored corps. Arik was deeply skeptical of the Bar-Lev Line. He worried that it put us in the position of having to fortify and defend a loose string of fixed positions that, in his view, would serve no purpose in any future war. Moshe Dayan, as Defense Minister, was even more profoundly opposed. He always felt we shouldn't have left our forces along the canal at all in the wake of our victory in 1967. Not only was that an invitation to further skirmishes, or worse. It meant that the canal remained closed. Had it been functioning, he reasoned, the income alone would have given Nasser every incentive to lie low after the war.

All of this was way above my pay grade at the time – though I had no doubt, as I told Dovik and others privately, that Arik and Dayan were right. My main contribution, in our officers' meetings, was to point out the *practical* limitations. If there was another full-scale war, I said, there was no way our fixed positions could be expected to deal with, or maybe even *know about*, an Egyptian crossing of the canal. From our "small tunnel" work, I knew how easy it was to operate *between* enemy positions, even when you had only a few hundred yards' leeway on either side. In some parts of the Bar-Lev line, there were six or seven miles between our positions. A whole brigade could pass between them without

our so much as noticing it.

What I noticed, meanwhile, was what an increasing number of Israelis all over the country could no longer ignore: the War of Attrition, if not a failure or an outright defeat, was claiming hundreds of Israeli lives without getting any nearer to a resolution. Of all the branches of the military, only the navy seemed to be trying to learn from a conflict that had proven painfully different from the triumphant six days of June 1967. Having lost its largest warship, and the lives of many of its crew, to a more mobile Egyptian missile boat, they were reconfiguring their own mix of vessels, and their strategy, with a determination to avoid similar ambushes in a future war. As for the air force, the early signs were that its own undeniable successes – not only in attacking Egyptian planes but, in July, shooting down a Soviet-piloted MiG-21 – were being allowed to obscure the obvious  new threat from Egypt's upgraded surface-to-air missile batteries. I sensed a similar myopia in our armored forces too. Since I'd been given command of my company, I could not help but notice the number of our front-line tanks being damaged or put out of action by Soviet-made AT-3s. These Saggers, as they were known, were highly portable units, the size of a small suitcase, and fired wire-guided anti-tank missiles.

I remained in the Sinai through the early part of 1971, and my company did eventually have a stint along the canal. But we were not in combat. By mid-July, the War of Attrition was obviously reaching a turning-point. Nobody wanted a return to a full-scale war: not us, not Nasser and, crucially, neither the Soviets nor the Americans. With the US taking the diplomatic lead, a cease-fire was finally agreed. Both sides claimed victory, citing the number of enemy killed, planes downed, tanks put out of action – and, of course, the fact that

neither had actually lost any territory. But both sides were simply exhausted by this point. Israelis certainly were. Many, if not most, had long since ceased to see a compelling reason for the fighting. By the time it was over, we had lost something like 900 dead – nearly 250 *more* than in the Six-Day War. Around two dozen of our fighter jets were shot down.

And there was at least one clear respect in which we did lose – though everyone seemed reluctant to admit the scale of the setback at the time. It came a couple of days *after* the cease-fire agreement. Under the terms negotiated through the Americans, each country's forces were barred from advancing from their positions when the fighting ended. The Egyptians' anti-aircraft batteries, in particular, were supposed to be prevented from moving into a roughly 30-mile strip immediately along the Suez Canal. Nasser, however, immediately started shifting his SAM batteries forward. Within a few months, there would be nearly 100 SAM sites in the "prohibited" zone, given the Egyptians control of 10 miles or more of the airspace on *our* side of the waterway in the event of a future war. Golda was incensed. So was Bar-Lev, and Motti Hod, the commander of the air force. We protested to the Americans. But as Nasser well knew, there was no way, and no heart, on our side to reopen the fighting and force him to move the SAM batteries back.

The War of Attrition ended at midnight on August 7, 1970. It was a Friday night. I've never had any trouble recalling the date exactly. Not because of the brief announcement of the cease-fire by Golda Meir, which I heard over a slightly crackly radio a few dozen miles back from the canal. Her address was very brief, and memorable only because it was now clear the fighting was over, at least for a while. The real reason I remember is a phone call which came

almost exactly 24 hours later – with the news that Nava had gone into labor with our first child.

The call was from her mother. With the fighting with the Egyptians not only continuing, but getting worse, as Nava's due date was approaching, we had agreed that the best thing would be for her to have the baby in Tiberias, where her parents could be with her. Now, as it happened, my company was in the middle of a battalion training exercise in the Negev. But when I got the call, I arranged to get a car from a nearby base and drove north. I reached Tiberias by about nine or ten the next morning, the ninth of August. I can still remember opening the door to the hospital room and seeing Nava, obviously tired, but beaming, cradling our daughter, Michal, in her arms.

I did manage to stay with them for two days before returning to my unit. And with Nava and Michal soon settled back into our apartment in Ramat Aviv, I made weekend visits back home whenever I could. Still, I saw nowhere near as much of our daughter's first few months as most other fathers. As Nava and I would discover even more jarringly over the next few years, that was an inescapable part of being an army officer – in a country which, cease-fire or not, was surrounded by neighbors who still rejected its existence, much less the idea of peace.

But at least my next posting was much closer to home. It was a mere 15 minutes or so from our apartment, in the corner of the former RAF base at Sirkin. On the First of April 1971, I was promoted from major to lieutenant-colonel, and became the commander of Sayeret Matkal.